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Grasping for the Remote

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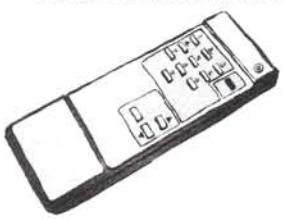
GRASPING FOR THE REMOTE

by DEBORAH ADELMAN

February, 1968. I am 10 years old, sitting with my dying grandmother in her bedroom, watching television. My parents haven't actually told us that Grammy Florence is dying, but my sisters and I know she is really, really ill, and not getting any better. Grammy's had surgery, lost a breast, been in and out of the hospital. She's weak and in pain. She spends most of her time in her big, comfortable bed, and since she doesn't read or write well enough to enjoy it, she mostly watches TV. She has a remote control so she can turn it off without getting out of bed, something that is becoming increasingly difficult for her to do.

My dad got angry at me just a few days ago, when I didn't respond to Grammy's soft cries from upstairs, asking me for help. He knew I was lying when I told him I hadn't heard her, but I wasn't able to find the right words to explain the panic I felt, how her moans left me feeling helpless, unable to assist, as if ignoring them would make the situation go away.

Grammy Florence has been living with us for the last few months, since Grandpa died. We've given her the middle bedroom on the second floor, sending some more of us girls upstairs into the remodeled attic. And my parents have installed a second cutting board, to avoid mixing our treif with her kosher. Grammy came to the United States from a small village in Poland, where she grew up



The news was tough that year.

gardening and raising animals. Everything about her—her voice, her smile, the way she cooks and eats and drinks coffee with chicory—is from someplace else, someplace far away and unimaginable. In the summer, when we live at Camp Sidney Cohen, she grows vegetables and milks the goat. We are as amazed at her ability to grab the little teats and produce a stream of warm milk as she is amused by our astounded looks, as if she has performed an incredible magic trick. She likes to wear her hair in braids she pins along both sides of her head, and tells us stories about a fictional Polish peasant girl she has created, Pola Kayushka, a friendly, folksy kind of girl. Grammy even dresses my youngest sister in a peasant girl outfit she creates from random items, and has her pretend that she is Pola, come for a visit to see the four American granddaughters in Milwaukee. Grammy knows how to take a pile of rags and tie them in knots, creating the form of a girl, a true rag doll, bland and faceless, nothing like the grinning Raggedy Anne dolls one can buy in a store.

My sisters and I like to hang around with Grammy in her bedroom. She is gentle and likes to joke and play with us, even now, when she is feeling bad. On this winter evening, I am alone with her in her room. Outside it is frozen-cold, but our house, despite the bitter weather outside, is warm, and I feel cozy in my pajamas sitting next to my grandmother, forgetting for a moment that she is never comfortable anymore, never free of pain, forgetting how her little moans, as she becomes sicker, send fear through me. Right now, everything seems fine, as it should be, Grammy and me, under the blankets.

But then the television news comes on. An announcer's voice warns us we are about to see something brutal, the execution of a Viet Cong operative by a South Vietnamese army officer, an incident captured accidentally by an American photographer. The warning shakes my grandmother and she reaches for the remote control lost somewhere in the blankets, and she can't find it, and she fumbles, sounding frightened, saying No, no. But she can't find the remote, and I am paralyzed and confused and don't help her. My grandmother has no doubt: she does not want to see this, doesn't want me to see it. I don't either. Or do I? Some tiny little part of me, deep inside, does. I know this, even as I feel the terror she feels take over me, too. I do. I don't. I do.

Grammy doesn't find the remote on time and she can't turn off the TV. It's lost in the bed and she tells me in a sharp, urgent voice to close my eyes, not to look, and she bows her head and covers her own eyes. I do, too, but not completely.

I peek.

There are two men standing there. It's clearly someplace far away and hot, as the men are bare- armed, something we haven't been in months, and they seem sweaty. They're not dressed like soldiers, although behind the officer there is another man in a military helmet watching the whole scene unfold. But the executing officer is bareheaded and has his sleeves rolled up as if he is about to go out and work in a field, and the tiny man about to be executed wears a simple plaid shirt, open at the neck, arms handcuffed behind his back.

It happens so fast. The officer raises his pistol and aims at the head of the man in the plaid shirt, and in one fluid, simple gesture, he fires. For one fleeting instant, a horrible expression passes over the face of the tiny man in the plaid shirt as the bullet travels through his brain, and then he crumples to the ground.

He is dead.

I have witnessed an execution

How quickly a man goes from the living to the dead. The border between the two seems so shockingly fragile, so easily crossed, though not for Grammy, whose suffering will still go on for months.

My grandmother, whose oldest son was killed by enemy mortar fire somewhere along the French-German border in 1944, is crying. Oh, this brutality. Worse, she has failed to protect me. And I sit, miserable, mute. I could have jumped out of bed and turned off the television. But I didn't. And though I am only 10, I know that soon she will be gone, and I have lost this one small chance to protect her. ■

Deborah Adelman has published fiction and non-fiction, including two books on youth in Russia during the time of Perestroika. She lives in Oak Park, Illinois, and teaches English at College of DuPage.